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SUBJECT: Mantis 2008 (1 of 2): More Workload, More Waiting in
Beijing

REF: A) 08 Beijing 0016; B) State 021417; C) 08 BAGHDAD 3537, 08
DHAKA 1201, 08 ABU DHABI 1356, 08 JAKARTA 2173, 08 RIYADH 1747, 08
AIT TAIPEI 1688; D) State 7490; E) CG Donahue 12 March 2009 email

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This is an action request. See paragraphs 12.

11. Summary: This cable summarizes Beijing's 2008 Mantis Security
Advisory Opinion (SAO) review. In 2008, overall SAO Mantis volume
increased by 10 percent, and wait times quadrupled to 16 weeks for
SAO clearance. End Summary.

2008 in Review: By the Numbers

12. (SBU) In calendar year 2007, Beijing processed 20,120 total
SAOs, of which 11,310 Mantis SAOs. In calendar year 2008, Beijing
processed 12,562 Mantis SAO cases, an increase of 10% over the
previous year. In 2008, 62 percent of Beijing's SAO volume was
Mantis SAOs. Post annually reports on Mantis trends for the year
prior (Ref A).

13. (SBU) According to CCD records, in calendar year 2008, Beijing received 77 "Objection" responses from the Department citing INA section 212(a)3A, compared with 54 in 2007 and 30 in 2006. These refusals represent .7 percent of all Mantis cases. Of refusals in 2008, 37 were B1/B2 travelers, 33 were J1 scholars, 5 were F1 students, and 2 were I visas.

2008 and Beyond: Post Efforts / Resources

14. (SBU) Beijing NIV unit's biggest challenge continues to be the facilitation of SAOs. In 2008, Mantis SAO growth outpaced that of overall applicant increases. As reported in Beijing's 2008 Consular Workload Statistics Summary, Post dedicates 5 Entry Level Officers (ELOs), 6 Foreign Service Nationals (FSNs), and 4 Eligible Family Members (EFMs) to support the SAO portfolio. 2008 and 2009 have brought unique challenges. Historically, SAO processing times have averaged 3-4 weeks; however, current processing times have stretched to four months for B1/B2 applicants. This fluctuation negatively impacted our customers in 2008, as thousands of business people, government officials, and students missed their travel dates. NIV works endlessly through radio messages, web chats, and our website to advise the public to apply early. During summer 2008 applicant volume peaks, our Consular Information Unit (CIU) received an average of 50 inquiries per day from applicants subject to SAOs on the status of their visa application, an increase of 100 percent over 2007. In addition, visa adjudicating officers spent vast amounts of valuable interview time educating the public and calming irate applicants who do not understand why they cannot travel despite applying months in advance.

15. (SBU) Starting in May 2009, Beijing will again open early summer

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interview slots to graduate students who may require administrative processing. We will continue to indicate in the Mantis prompt line if an applicant is a student or scholar with strict program start dates. Post values recent feedback from the Department on Mantis SAO reform, and appreciates clearing partner commitment to clear students and scholars cases within 30 days of receipt of SAO requests (Ref B).

16. (SBU) Post will continue to process and submit a vast majority of all SAO requests to Washington within one day of completion of the application, and notes that the current lack of predictability in the process creates uncertainty for applicants, adjudicating officers and interested parties. When posts cannot predict how long administrative processing will take, we may submit cases that have no realistic chance of clearing in time for travel.

2008 Special Projects

17. (SBU) In February 2008, Beijing held a country-wide SAO conference, and greatly appreciated the attendance by former CA/VO Office Director Tim Smith. In October of 2008, Beijing participated in a Digital Video Conference (DVC) with NIV sections in China, Russia, Israel, Taiwan, and India, the largest source countries for Mantis SAO applicants. Sharing of best practices benefitted all participants, and Beijing appreciated senior consular leadership participation in the event. Post appreciated refuels (Ref C) from other posts experiencing frustrating processing delays.

18. (SBU) In December 2008, Beijing submitted for CA consideration a detailed memo on possible resolutions to current negative SAO situation, and appreciates Department consideration of our suggested remedies.

19. (SBU) Post appreciated briefings by DAS David Donahue during his February 2009 China visit on possible liberalizations in the visa validity for Mantis-subject applicants, and Beijing anticipates this will reduce volume in repeat SAOs.

110. (SBU) Beijing maintains an "Entities of Interest" list that in

2008 was scrubbed and updated to reflect changes in the Chinese military-industrial complex and updated TAL.

¶11. (SBU) Post recognizes the limited resources available in 2008 to the Department to process these increases in SAO demand, and the necessity of clearance through other agencies whose processes do not fall within Department authority. We also would like to note with gratitude the tireless work of the CA/VO/L/C Mantis unit, particularly Eric Knechtges and Colette Lankford, in pursuing and processing an unprecedented number of clearances in 2008. Further, Post thanks the Department for guidance contained in Ref D.

¶12. Action Requests

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¶A. Beijing requests more detailed and frequent guidance from CA/VO on the process and wait times of SAO approvals, including updated guidance on post check eligibility and information requested of applicants now that Mantis B1/B2 applicant receive 12 month, multiple entry visas.

¶B. Post also notes a significant increase in requests for more information on cases submitted for an SAO from the Department (at times several months) after the initial SAO is submitted. Post always includes all standard supporting documents in our SAOs, and we have noticed from "needs info" responses increased requests for information not readily available to the applicant, creating a time-consuming chain of communication from the Department to us to the applicant to the U.S. inviter, back to the applicant, back to us, and back to the Department. We request feedback on ways to reduce these time consuming requests.

¶C. (SBU) Post requests increased feedback and communications on refusals from ISN and CA/VO/L/C to enable post to make better decisions on which cases should be submitted for Mantis SAOs.

¶D. (SBU) Post requests updated public language from the Department on SAO processing changes so that we can disseminate more transparent communications to all parties, including to applicants themselves and for use in embassy-wide conversations/meetings (Ref E). Multiple student blog sites in China are dedicated to tracking the progress of SAO applicants and include detailed information on technical research plans of applicants. A carefully crafted set of talking points should be used in communicating to scientific and technical background applicants. We request language be revised and cleared for public use at the soonest date.

¶E. (SBU) We request CA/VO and ISN support and attend another annual Mantis SAO Conference in Beijing in spring 2009.

¶F. (SBU) Cooperation across Mantis posts should continue in 2009, and Beijing invites suggestions from all addressees on 2009 Mantis SAO Conference agenda items to further cooperation in 2009.

¶G. (SBU) Post also requests the creation of a new statistical report in CCD that will allow Post to search by visa class, date, SAO type and status.

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